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## Engaging parliaments on the promotion of human rights including on the work of the UN Human Rights Council and its Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

Virtual workshop for parliamentarians in charge of human rights of parliaments of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, all Members of the Commonwealth, organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Commonwealth Secretariat (ComSec) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

**Two half-days spread over two days, Tuesday 17 and Wednesday 18 November 2020**

### BACKGROUND

Parliaments, in particular their human rights committees, have a critical role to play in the promotion and protection of human rights by turning international human rights obligations into meaningful action at the national level. Through its powers, parliament has the constitutional means to play a meaningful role in the promotion of human rights by transposing international standards into national law and by collaborating with international bodies, notably the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), entrusted with ensuring respect for these standards.

The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) recognized the importance of parliaments' contribution in its resolution 35/29 (adopted in 2017) in which it encouraged States, in accordance with their national legal frameworks, to promote the participation of parliaments as stakeholders in all stages of the Universal Periodic Review. The HRC tasked the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) with producing an analytical report on parliaments' contribution to the work of the HRC. This report (A/HRC/38/25) was prepared with the assistance of the IPU and submitted and discussed by the HRC in June 2018. The report included numerous examples of parliamentary engagement on human rights, in particular at committee-level.

Against this backdrop, the IPU co-organized with OHCHR two international workshops in 2018 and 2019 for members of parliamentary human rights committees which identified good practices and new courses of action. Participants in these workshops also had the opportunity to take part in the session of the HRC during which they were able to immerse themselves in its work.

Drawing on the conclusions of the Geneva 2018 and 2019 workshops, it was suggested to continue this exercise by focusing on a smaller, more cohesive set of countries and to focus in this regard on the parliaments of countries that belong to the Commonwealth.

In this perspective, the IPU in collaboration with the OHCHR and the Secretariat of the Commonwealth started a series of regional workshops that involved parliaments of Africa, Europe and the Caribbean that took place in July 2020 and which helped the participants to explore and identify avenues for their in-depth involvement in the UPR process and in the work of the Human Rights Council in general.

As a continuation of these regional trainings, the October virtual workshop dedicated to Asia-Pacific parliaments, aims to:

- \* Sensitize members of parliament to the need and possibilities to become fully involved in promoting and protecting human rights, including through the work of the HRC and its UPR;
- \* Equip parliamentarians with the requisite tools to take human rights better into account;
- \* Build and strengthen partnerships between parliament and other actors, in particular national human rights institutions, civil society and NGOs, with a view to coordinating strategies to promote human rights;
- \* Share experiences; and
- \* Draw up an implementation roadmap for each parliament that takes into account existing UPR recommendations as well as concluding observations from the UN treaty bodies.

The format of the virtual workshop is conceived to promote maximum interaction and input from parliamentarians, who will all have an opportunity to share their expectations of the workshop and their personal and institutional experiences in promoting human rights as well as to identify concrete steps on how they intend to take the human rights agenda forward in their own countries. Sessions I and II will follow a Davos-style format in which a moderator will ask tailored and brief questions to discussants, leaving ample time for discussion with participants.



## PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

**Tuesday, 17 November:**

7.00 a.m.

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### Video message

- Mr. Martin Chungong, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
  - Ms. Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
  - Ms. Patricia Scotland QC, Secretary General of the Commonwealth
  - Ambassador Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger, President of the UN Human Rights Council
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7.30 a.m.

### Brief introduction of participants and explanation of individual expectations about the workshop

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7.45 a.m.

### Session I: Parliaments, the UN Human Rights Council and the UN treaty bodies: what cooperation for a mutual benefit? Sharing examples of good practices

*Without parliamentary action—whether passing laws or overseeing government action—very few UN human rights recommendations would actually be implemented. Parliaments can discuss the draft national reports to the UN Human Rights Council under its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the reports to the UN treaty bodies, take part in the official presentation of the reports to these UN mechanisms and help ensure implementation of their recommendations.*

This session aims to look at ways in which parliaments can become involved in the different stages of the reporting procedures of the UN Human Rights Council and the UN treaty bodies. It will touch on the major efforts made in recent years by the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to include the work of parliaments more systematically in their own deliberations. The session should also draw some lessons from these efforts and discuss additional ways for these UN mechanisms to engage with parliaments and involve them directly in their work. By way of illustration, this session will look at two interesting national case studies of parliamentary involvement in the UPR and/or UN treaty body reporting procedures.

#### Discussants:

- Gianni Magazzeni, Chief, UPR Branch, OHCHR
- Lord Fusitu'a, Member of Parliament, Tonga
- Moderator: Rogier Huizenga, Programme Manager, IPU

Discussion

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8.30 a.m.

Break

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8.45 a.m.

### Session II: Strengthening parliamentary strategies for a better contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights at the national level in light of COVID-19

*States are facing unprecedented challenges from COVID-19 and under these extraordinary circumstances member States have the primary responsibility to protect and promote human rights. To this end, parliamentarians may influence policies and budgets at the national level, announce special economic packages to fight against COVID-19, monitor policy implementation programmes at local levels, address the needs and concerns of their constituencies, and act as a catalyst in the realisation of human rights domestically. Globally, a number of parliaments have set up specific committees devoted to human rights in order to do this effectively.*

This session will look at human rights, health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 faced by Asian and Pacific Commonwealth countries. The session will also share best practices in promoting parliamentary oversight and discuss how parliaments can promote and protect human rights in absence of human rights committees during these challenging times. The session will

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also look at the role of parliament in assessing the economic and human rights impact of COVID-19 measures undertaken by the government, including through effective parliamentary oversight to ensure that government actions are compatible with their human rights obligations. Parliamentary involvement in the development of national human rights action plans which include parliamentary cooperation with other stakeholders namely national human rights institutions (NHRIs) and civil society. Session will also highlight the significance of cooperation between parliamentarians and other stakeholders such as NHRIs and civil society in fight against COVID-19.

Discussants

- Jeehan Mahmood, Member of Parliament, Maldives
  - Alvick Maharaj, Member of Parliament, Fiji, Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Justice, Law and Human Rights
  - Professor Rosalind Croucher, President, Australian Human Rights Commission
  - Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
- Moderator: Commonwealth Secretariat

Discussion

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10.00 a.m. **Conclusion of the session ■**

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**Wednesday, 18 November:**

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7.00 a.m. **Session III: Discussion of the UPR recommendations for the countries participating in the workshop**

Participants will receive in advance a copy of the list of the most recent UPR recommendations made by the Human Rights Council with regard to their countries' human rights situation. The organizers of the workshop will identify and highlight in the list those recommendations that require direct parliamentary follow-up.

During this session, each participant will be requested to present the contribution that their parliament has provided as well as plans to provide to the implementation of these recommendations.

Discussants

Representative of each delegation participating in the meeting

- Moderators:  
Akiyo Afouda, Programme Officer, IPU  
Jeroen Klok, Human Rights Officer, OHCHR

Discussion

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8.30 a.m. Break

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8.45 a.m. **Session III (cont'd)**

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10.00 a.m. **Conclusion of the virtual workshop ■**

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